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THE MEDIA

The Action and Resource Centre for Low Income Families (ARC) is a project run by low income people for low income people. It was established by the Brotherhood of St Laurence in late 1972 as the Family Centre Project.

The accompanying media policy statement is extracted from a forthcoming publication by ARC *The LIP Policies* (\$2 plus 50c postage). It is available from ARC, 116 Fitzroy Street, Fitzroy, 3065. Telephone: 419 4533. The policies have been prepared by the staff and members with the assistance of a professional Social Policy Worker who has skills in policy development.

Other Policy statements from the booklet are on: Consumer Rights and Credit, Education, Emergency Aid, Housing, employment and Unemployment, Fuel, Income Security, the Law, Youth, Welfare Agencies and Indigenous Workers.

The policies have a particular theoretical and ideological significance. In order for any group of people to understand and control their environment, it is necessary for them to define their own environment in their own way, in their own terms, and in their own words. ARC recognises that its own definition of issues is critical to ARC's own conceptual and political development. This recognition is both implicit and explicit. It is imperative for ARC to define its own agenda for debate rather than to simply participate in debates and decisions structured by others.

The media policy is significant not only for what it says but because it has been prepared by a group of low income people. The policy statement clearly exposes how the mass media exclude and control low income people.

David Griffiths
17 December 1979

WHAT IS THE PROBLEM?

The general problem is that access to the media is limited by the owners and employees of the media. It is the owners and employees who decide the what, who and how of publishing and broadcasting.

Specifically, low income people are effectively excluded from the media. This report cites examples of how the media has exploited low income people at ARC.

In essence, low income people are regarded as suitable examples of poverty. The typical request from a television station is for a low income person who will discuss what it is like to be poor and how a particular policy or situation is affecting them personally. Similarly,

authors of books on poverty like to use case studies of low income people to illustrate their arguments.

Low income people are not expected to have views and ideas about or outside of their own personal situation. The assumption seems to be that because people are low income earners their views on the causes of and solutions to poverty are irrelevant and meaningless. For views on causes and solutions the media invariably consult the experts from organisations such as the Victorian Council of Social Service, the Australian Council of Social Service, the Brotherhood of St. Laurence and the Institute of Social and Applied Economic Research. Thus the news value of low income people is limited to their novelty value.

WHY IS IT A PROBLEM?

The problem occurs because of the following related factors:

1. Historical: Low income people have been published and broadcast as victims (victims of poverty, unemployment, earthquakes, fires and floods) as aggressors (aggressors in crime, riots, rebellions and revolutions) and as deviants (bludgers, criminals and workshy).
2. Personalities: The media is interested in personalising news events and issues. It is easier to personalise the poverty issue by discussing the experience of being poor than it is to personalise the explanations of the poor for poverty. Furthermore, the media creates and uses predominantly middle class spokespersons who reflect and reinforce the middle class values of the media.
3. Influentials: The news values particular individuals and groups depends on who they are rather than what they say. Low income individuals and groups are seen to be interesting but not influential. This reflects the power structure of society which denies low income people the opportunity to be influential.
4. Conflict: When individuals and groups are neither "personalities" nor "influentials" they are expected to prove and demonstrate their newsworthiness. This is why ARC's anti-poverty vigil, the demonstrations in the Gas and Fuel Corporation's showroom and at the National Youth Conference received publicity. The problem with such demonstrations is that they need to escalate to retain their newsworthiness.

THE LONG TERM

1. Low income people need to understand the media for what it is and how, by power over information, resources and decision-making the media exclude low income people.
2. Low income people need to develop appropriate skills for dealing with the media.
3. Low income people need to educate the media about the media. The assumptions and values of the media need to change.

THE SHORT-TERM

There is a need to decide when to co-operate and when not to co-operate with the media. The wrong kind of co-operation could effectively undermine ARC's basic principles and make the attainment of those principles even more difficult. The right kind of co-operation could serve ARC's principles and help the process of educating the media. In particular, it is necessary to:

1. Co-operate with sympathetic magazines, newspapers, television and radio stations.
2. Co-operate with sympathetic journalists whether or not their magazines, newspapers, television and radio stations are sympathetic or unsympathetic.
3. Use spokespersons who are able to withstand and cope with unsympathetic journalists and unsympathetic magazines, newspapers, radio and television stations.

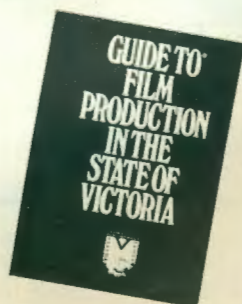
EXAMPLES OF HOW THE MEDIA HAS EXPLOITED ARC.

1. A news conference was held with a journalist from the Age. The conference had been initiated by ARC and the issue under discussion was security and the Housing Commission. While the ARC speakers were willing to speak about the nature of the security problem, they also wished to stress that the security problem was caused by the Government and the Housing Commission and that an important need was for tenant management of estates. The journalist wanted to focus exclusively on the security problem and not understand the *Plan* of why there was a security problem and what could be done about the problem. The journalist therefore, wanted to focus on consequences instead of causes and solutions. Subsequently, no story was published.

2. The current affairs television program, Nationwide, wanted to interview lone parents about coping as lone parents. The ARC response was that a lone parent could not be provided to talk about being a lone parent but that it was possible to provide spokespersons who were or had been lone parents and who could generalise on the situation of lone parents and talk about policy. The program makers decided that they would not proceed. The explanation was that although it was more worthwhile it would be unacceptable to the Producer of the program.
3. The current affairs television program, Nationwide, interviewed some ARC members about being poor. Two of the members were interviewed in their homes. A third at a bus stop. A majority of the questions directed at the three members concerned their personal situations. In each case the members tried to explain that poverty was not the fault of the individual but in each case the interviewer moved on to personal questions, and most of their statements made about causes were edited out of the program. The final broadcast program included two groups — low income people interviewed in their homes or at a bus stop — who were used to explain what it was like being poor — and two anti-poverty experts, Professor Henderson and Peter Hollingworth. The experts were interviewed in their offices and were used to explain the why of being poor and what should be done.
4. The current affairs television program, Nationwide, was doing a program on the Social Security system. A LIP victim was asked questions about the activities of a field officer who had interviewed her and the kind of questions he had asked. Brotherhood of St. Laurence and Australian Council of Social Service (ACOSS) spokespersons were used to comment on the general situation. An interview had been recorded with an ARC income security worker. Unfortunately, her comments were about policy rather than the personal and she did not have the status of a Brotherhood or ACOSS representative. The program appeared without the ARC segment.

If you're planning a film or television production in Victoria, then you should earmark \$3 of your budget for a copy of the

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Published by the Victorian Film Corporation, it is the most detailed listing of services, facilities, personnel, production companies, state and federal law, distributors and exhibitors, media, unions, guilds, location advice, useful contacts, etc., yet compiled in this State.

For anyone currently working or interested in Victoria's film and television industry, this manual should be compulsory.

**Copies are available from the Victorian Film Corporation,
409 King Street, Melbourne
(03) 329 7033.**

Price \$3.00 (add \$1 for postage)